

State Supreme Court rules: Sea-Tac's \$15-an-hour minimum wage applies to airport workers

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The Washington State Supreme Court, in a much anticipated ruling, said Friday that the \$15-an-hour minimum wage adopted by SeaTac voters in 2013 applies to approximately 4,500 workers at Sea-Tac Airport.

The 5-4 decision rejected arguments by four plaintiffs, led by Alaska Airlines and the Washington Restaurant Association, that the wage did not apply to the airport because it is the property of the Port of Seattle.

"We hold that (SeaTac) Proposition 1 can be enforced at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport because there is no indication that it will interfere with airport operations: We also hold that federal labor law does not preempt the provision protecting workers from retaliation," the court majority said in its opinion.

Supporters declare victory for SeaTac's Proposition 1



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David Rolf, SEIU International vice president, speaks as supporters of SeaTac's Proposition 1 gather to declare victory on Tuesday, November 26, 2013 at Sea-Tac International Airport. The voter initiative will raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour.

Supporters of the \$15 wage were elated.

"Now, possibly, our food pantry lines will go down," said the Rev. Jan Bolerjack, minister at the Riverton United Methodist Church.

Airport workers have made up a big proportion of those using the food pantry. "Some workers have come right off shift to get food for their families," said Bolerjack. "A living wage is the only fair thing, the only just thing, for workers working a full shift."

The \$15 wage was enacted by a narrow margin in 2013, after a major deployment of resources by the Service Employees International Union. It was opposed by major airport and Sea-Tac business interests.

“Nearly 5,000 workers on airport property have been waiting, and have piled up nearly \$15 million in unpaid wages: Those workers have been waiting, now they can stop waiting,” said David Rolf, president of SEIU 775, who masterminded the campaign and is now writing a book on how the \$15-an-hour minimum wage campaign gained a foothold in the Northwest.

The Supreme Court reversed a King County Superior Court ruling, which said that SeaTac didn’t have authority to set a minimum wage at the airport. The port ownership argument was challenged in a brief filed by state Attorney General Bob Ferguson: The brief was cited by the Supreme Court in its majority opinion.

“This important ruling helps protect the rights of workers at Seattle-Tacoma Airport and recognizes the broad authority state and local governments have to support their hard working residents,” Ferguson said in a statement.

The \$15 wage was challenged by Alaska Airlines, the Washington Restaurant Association, BF Foods and Filo Foods. The plaintiffs had a quiet backstage ally in the powerful staff of the Port of Seattle.

“Year after year after year, everytime a labor group took an issue to the port . . . the port has taken the position their narrow focus in running a business precluded action on issues of broader concern,” said Rolf. The \$15 an hour saw a “total reversal,” he added, the new argument being that the \$15 wage constituted “an interference with Port operations.”

“It has been very difficult to see where the interests and actions of major port businesses stop, and where activities of the port start,” said Rolf. “There is active collaboration with the port’s two major clients, international shipping companies and major airlines. The port appears at times not to operate as a publicly chartered operation. Its actions seem at cross purposes for an entity run by public elected officials and subsidized by the taxpayers.”

The \$15-an-hour minimum wage has been in effect for a year and a half for non-airport workers in the town of SeaTac.

Businesses that initially protested seem to have adjusted. The Cedarbrook Lodge, which helped lead the campaign against Prop. 1, broke ground on a \$16 million expansion soon after the election. MasterPark has posted ‘now hiring signs’ for new workers at the new minimum wage.